GOD OF THE OUTSIDERS

The Second in an Advent Series of Sermons

December 4, 1988, 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Scripture
Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 1:46-56

"He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree." -Luke 1:52 (RSV)

In Herman Wouk's novel, Inside, Outside, a young man tells the story of trying to live in modern America as part of a very traditional Orthodox Jewish family. It is a funny story, often moving and wonderfully told. At the very end Israel David Goodkind, Izzy, an official of the American government, has come to terms with who he is. He is leaving Tel Aviv, shortly after the Six-Day War. As the plane climbs and he sees the lights of the city recede, he recalls the morning prayer from the Orthodox liturgy:

> "Look down from Heaven and see that
> we have become a scorn and a derision
> among the nations. We are considered
> as sheep bound for slaughter,
> ...for smiting and for
> shame. Yet with all this we have not
> forgotten Your name. Do not You forget us."

And he thinks to himself -

"We spoke those words, I and my father and his father, and their fathers before them, for two thousand years - and even in my own time, alas - as a terrible statement of fact." [p. 641, 642]

It is a very different thing for gentiles to visit Dachau than it is for Jews. It is a fundamentally different experience for American G.I.'s to visit places in Europe where they fought 44 years ago than it is for Jews to visit communities where they and their families were persecuted. And part of the vast difference, beneath the unspeakable pain is the mystery, the almost laughable irony of it all -

"We have not forgotten You. Do not You forget us"

What kind of a God would select Israel to be a chosen people? Is it some kind of a cosmic joke, a theological prank played out on the stage of history? God had options, we have to assume. Why not Egypt - with the grandeur of its monuments, its advanced civilization while the Jews are wandering around the wilderness trying to get organized? Why not Babylon, Assyria - sophisticated war machines? Why, for that matter not Greece or Rome? The scholars of antiquity know that the basic irony of Western civilization is this -

"How odd of God
To choose the Jews."

There have been moments of grandeur and power and pride. King David provided a few, Solomon too; and a few others. But mostly God's chosen have been on the outside looking in, deliberately and systematically excluded from the inside - whether we're talking about international power, politics 500 years before Christ, the trade halls in the Middle Ages, Ivy League schools in the 1940s and 50s, or elite country clubs today. God's chosen are outsiders.

Just this week Fourth Church hosted a group of Soviet clergy, as part of a Rotary International project which brought 150 Soviets to Chicago to meet with their professional counterparts - physicians, attorneys, teachers, military people. The American clergy commission consisted of two Protestants, a Ukranian Orthodox priest, Roman Catholic diocese official, Muslim professor and the chairman of the Jewish Federation's committee on Soviet Jews. Our Soviet counterparts included Orthodox priests, professors and church officials - two Baptists, the Cantor from the Moscow Synagogue and two men from the Government Ministry of Religious Affairs. The American from the Jewish Federation asked, at the end of the meeting, about the simple fact that Jewish citizens of the Soviet Union are singled out by having their Jewish identity indicated on all official papers. Everybody became defensive and nervous. The two men from the government said something about it being racial, not religious. But there it was again. In that repressive culture, slowly moving toward a bit of religious freedom, Jews are treated differently from everybody else - outsiders...

The earliest objection to Christianity was that it sounded like an outsider religion. A God who is revealed in the short and tragic life of a peasant Jewish carpenter? A God revealed in a dismal execution - at the hand of Caesar? What kind of a religion is that?

The mystery and the irony are there from the beginning. God's chosen people are outsiders, or, God sides with the outsiders. The mystery is perhaps not so much a commentary on the people as it is a revelation of something in the heart of God. Either you become an outsider when you get involved with this God - or - God specifically chooses to throw in with the outsiders - or - it is both of these.

The beginning of the Christian chapter of the story is so charming that both mystery and irony are completely covered over. The cultural captivity of Christmas is so absolute that we have long lost touch with the fact that it's the story about outsiders. Mary, Joseph and the Baby have achieved something in popular mythology that they never accomplished in

life, namely social acceptance. In the warmth and loveliness of the season and the authentic generosity and kindness it inspires we are inclined to forget that the reality of the story is almost brutal. Riding on a donkey when you are nine months pregnant, being refused a room, giving birth in a cold, dark, damp, stinking stable is not a lovely experience. It's the kind of thing that only happens to an outsider.

Mary is an outsider. Her people are outsiders in their own land. The Romans run the place. The Jews are captives, essentially, oppressed, burdened by occupying armies. But within her own community Mary is an outsider. Her pregnancy is not a wonderful event. It's a scandal. She isn't even married. Her fiance has every reason to walk away from her and leave her to the sneers and scorn of her community.

And so, when her condition is apparent, she hurries off to visit a kind, understanding, older relative, Elizabeth, who is also surprisingly pregnant. Mary is a frightened, confused teen-ager. But what she says after Elizabeth acknowledges that Mary's son will be God's Son and Savior - Mary's Christmas Carol is revolutionary. It is very much an outsider's song. It is about a God of the outsiders.

> "My Soul magnifies the Lord...
> and my spirit rejoices in God my savior
> for he has regarded the low estate of his
> handmaiden..."

And then -

> "he has scattered the proud...
> he has put down the mighty
> from their thrones,
> and exalted those of low degree:
> he has filled the hungry with good things
> and the rich he has sent empty away."

G. B. Shaw once said that "The song of Mary is the most revolutionary song ever written."

The Magnificat has inspired some of the greatest music we have ever produced. It has been set to music by Frescobaldi, Vivaldi, Mozart, Palestrina, Berlioz, and of course, J. S. Bach. The Magnificat is mostly heard in Latin and one of the reasons is that in English it can make us squirm a bit, particularly those of us who are clearly not poor and hungry: so therefore, within the perimeters of the Magnificat, the rich and the proud - i.e. the insiders.

It is there from the beginning and it is there throughout. God's people are the perennial outsiders of history and now Jesus has a special affinity for the little people, the outsiders. It's not that he has anything against rich people. It's just that the poor ones seem to understand him, accept him, trust him, love him and need him and know that they need him. Now middle class Christians don't particularly like to hear about the Bible's preferential treatment for the poor - the outsiders - the weak. This minister would prefer to tip toe around the Magnificat! But

it is hard to ignore it... "Blessed are you poor - for yours is the Kingdom," he said. Catholic scholar, Raymond E. Brown helps by pointing out that the issue is not simply economics - but how people see themselves, that in Luke the poor are "the physically poor, but more widely, those who could not trust in their own strength but had to rely in utter confidence on God: the lonely, the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the widows and orphans..." The opposite of the poor - are not simply the rich but "the self-sufficient, who show no need of God or his help." [The Birth of the Messiah, p. 351]

It is there from the beginning and it is there throughout the Bible - and throughout subsequent history. God is a God of those who have no where else to turn... There is probably no more eloquent example than the power the Gospel of Christ had for a community of people who had every reason to detest Christianity as a part of the oppressive system in which they were victims, namely the American slaves. One of the miracles of grace within our own story is that Black Religion in this country did not become immediately and utterly vengeful, but instead reflected the Biblical witness in ways utterly beyond the understanding and experience of the white Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists and Episcopalians who were slave owners. The slaves knew that God was not pleased with slavery. The slaves read or heard the Old Testament stories of Israel in Egyptian slavery with more accuracy than the plantation owners and overseers. "Go Down Moses" they sang - the slaves did - "Go down and tell Pharoh - let my people go." They knew who Pharoh was and they knew whose side God was on.

Their trust in God, their faith that God was for them, gave them hope for a day of freedom. Their trust in God also gave them comfort and grace which turned into strength, somehow, to survive systemic, institutionalized, socially-accepted, religiously-approved brutality. When they were beaten, when their families were torn apart and scattered, when they died, they sang -

> "Nobody knows de trouble I've seen,
> Nobody knows but Jesus...
> Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down,
> Nobody knows but Jesus..."
>
> "Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus..."

God is the God of the outsiders, the ones who have no hope but God, the weak who have no strength but God's.

You can't allow this young pregnant girl into our Advent observance without getting around to our own outsiders, try as we might. Poverty in our culture and our economy, is complex. Nobody intends it but try, for instance, explaining Cabrini Green to a Soviet citizen. Donald Trump is going to entertain Mikhail Gorbachev next week. Try to explain why there are thousands of people living on the streets in New York and Chicago; that our infant mortality rate is something like seventeenth in the world. Poverty is complex and it is not fair to oversimplify its causes or its proposed remedies or to engage in diatribes whose only effect is to make those who are not poor feel guilty... But it is also very simple. The poor are getting poorer while the rest of us are getting richer. With each

generation of welfare dependency, unwanted children, unmarried mothers, deteriorating schools, increasing crime, disintregrating families, poverty grows by quantum leaps. At the level of cultural values it is very simple. In the introduction to his new book, The Great Divide, Studs Terkel cites two items which appeared in the newspaper last fall. The first is from the Chicago Sun Times, November 11, 1987:

"The poorest one-tenth of Americans will pay 20 per cent more of their earnings in federal taxes next year than they did (10 years ago) and the richest will pay 20 per cent less."

And the second was in the Los Angeles Times, October 25, 1987:

"Just before the stock market crashed, Forbes Magazine announced that the number of billionaires in America had doubled in the past year. Just before the stock market crashed, Shasta County, California, closed its entire library system for lack of money. Is there any question that something has gone wrong in America?" [p. 9]

Young Mary believed that the birth of her baby was going to make a difference in the way people lived and thought and set their priorities and established their values. She actually believed that Christianity was going to change things and that the outsiders would receive justice and compassion and love from God - but also from the insiders. So who will raise the value issues in the midst of all this cultural and economic complexity, if it is not the community of faith which celebrates his coming? It is, I believe, one of our Christian duties.

Mary trusted that the birth would make a difference. And may I suggest that if the systemic dynamics of poverty seem beyond your grasp, that each of us can encounter it, see it and deal with it personally. There are hungry and homeless people around us. They need our help.

And the simple truth is this - we need them. We need nothing so much as to help; to begin to reflect this commitment our God has to the outsiders. Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, standing in her soup kitchen, said, "I'm tired of hearing myself called saintly... I work in the soup line, serving others, in order to help myself a little. We are here because we are in need. We are here because we are hungry. I know in my heart that we are being fed all the time..." [Robert Coles, Harvard Diary, p. 48]

Could it be that you and I are also the poor and needy? We must be very careful with this because at one level the answer is clearly no and it would be irresponsible even to try somehow to call most of us poor. On the level of what we have and how the system works for us - we are insiders, we are not poor. But on a deeper level - yes, most assuredly, yes.

In a speech to business leaders this week Senator Paul Simon told about a group of U. S. Senators who meet weekly for prayer and to talk about their lives and to share burdens... "We all have them," he said - no matter: a daughter with a drug problem, a son mentally ill, a relationship which is dissolving, a dream disappearing, a fear, an anxiety.

The Gospel is, the word of the Magnificat is, that God hears the cries of people who are oppressed in Third World shacks and in Lake Shore Drive condominiums. God hears the cries of grief of wives, husbands, parents, children - who have lost dear ones wherever they are. God knows the pain and hears the cry of outsiders - hungry for bread and hungry for love and acceptance and friendship. God hears cries of pain in South African prisons and also in the Intensive Care Unit of Northwestern Hospital. God hears the quiet crying of the lonely - the bitter - the desperate. You and I are in there somewhere. You and I are poor - at the point of our needs, which we may never have shared with anyone, may never even have articulated, or even acknowledged - precisely because of our pride, which the Bible calls our sin.

And to us come the words of the young woman, about to give birth, about a God who will raise up the poor and the needy, who will feed our hunger, who will come to us and nourish us with love and grace and joy.

And so I invite you, in this lovely season, to know your own need, your own poverty, your hunger, in order better to receive the gift of an infant born in Bethlehem... And I invite you to come to table, to eat and drink and to be nourished and filled by the love of our God.

Amen.